

A New Musical Setting of the Liturgy - 2003



Part 1 When Vaughan Williams was once asked for his views on composing music he replied, "*It's a rum go*". I've done a fair bit of composing over the years – for my degrees at Cambridge and Durham, during my teaching career for school pupils, and even, as an LEA Music Adviser, for massed performances at the Royal Festival and Albert Halls. But when I was encouraged to undertake this challenge I realised that, whatever the response of the St James's congregation might be, I would have to face a higher judgement – the text, sung week in, week out, is after all the central part of our worship – nothing less than my best effort would do. There's hardly a more "*rum go*" than composing a new musical setting of the liturgy for a congregation to sing on a regular basis.

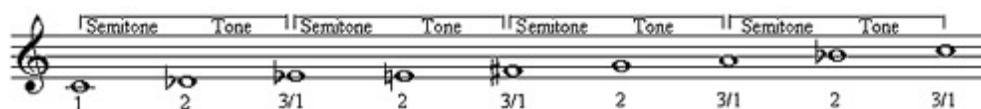
Every composition – indeed, every creative effort – sets its own expressive and technical challenges. I will try to unpick these in the next articles but there are extra ones on top. These are that the setting should enhance worship for the majority of the congregation and also that they (you) should be able to learn and sing it. Time will tell – all that any 'creative', as industry calls us, asks is an open mind and a willingness to give it a go (however rum!)

The sung liturgical text has a huge expressive range – from triumphant affirmation of God's glory, through pleading for his mercy, to reflection on the mystery of faith. Yet people do not expect services to go on too long these days, certainly not the length common in earlier centuries. Then, composers were expected to, and did, allow people the time and expanse of musical phrasing and form to immerse themselves in personal reflection on these huge spiritual themes. It is certainly a challenge to condense the breadth required by these traditional words and still try to provide music that has an impact – either that or go for something trite and comfortable that requires no response at all.

There can also be a tension between what a congregation may be used to and what a composer might write in other circumstances – there are technical compromises to be made, yet the result should still aim for an integrity of style and it must work musically. In future articles I shall explain how I have tried to meet these issues in the different 'movements' that make up the sung liturgy.

Part 2 Last month I gave the background to this project and outlined some of the composing challenges that I had to face. This article will start to explain the musical process of composing the new setting.

Two of the main elements of western music, melody and harmony, are both underpinned by the scale system on which they are based. To give myself maximum flexibility to encompass the huge expressive range of the liturgical text, I decided to use a scale invented during the last century that is a mixture of the familiar major and minor scales. This scale is deeply symbolic. Firstly, of the Trinity, being made up of a series of cells of three notes, each cell covering the interval of a minor third. Moreover, the whole scale can only be transposed (shifted) three times by a semitone before it arrives at the same series of notes as the first version.



The triad (three-note chord) that can be formed on the first note of each cell can be major or minor so that the music can appear to move rapidly through 8 different keys (C, Eb, F# and A in both major and minor forms). The usually dominant interval of the perfect 5th (e.g. C-G) is balanced in this scale by the diminished 5th /augmented 4th (e.g. C – F#). This interval was from early times labelled as the *diabolus (devil) in musica*. Thus there is a further symbolism that mirrors life itself for believers – the struggle between human weakness and God's perfection.



Other notes from the scale can be added to any of these chords to give varying degrees of dissonance (the musical tension caused when notes 'clash' with each other). One of the most important threads in the development of western music through the last thousand or so years is the way dissonance is used. Dissonance plays a large part in giving music its emotional impact and can evoke a variety of sentiments such as longing, sadness, pathos, pain, anger and mystery. I have employed a moderate level of dissonance in my setting, saving its more powerful use for particularly significant moments, such as in *Christ Has Died*.

The melodies that can be created from this scale are equally varied, ranging from the widely leaping and strongly major-keyed opening of the *Gloria* to the more winding, stepwise and chromatic *Agnus Dei*. I have used a good deal of repetition and have kept the rhythms deliberately straightforward in order to make the setting easier to learn and sing.

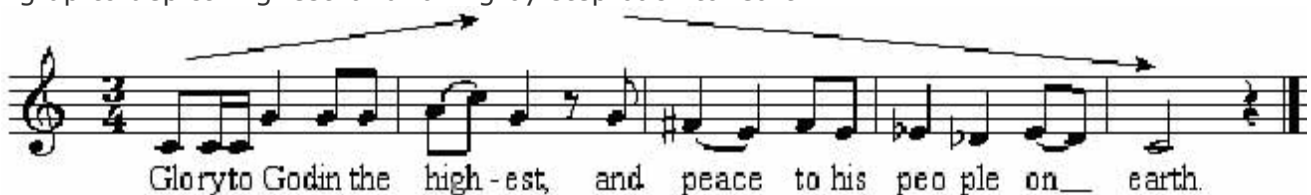
Next month I shall go into more detail about specific passages to try and take you right 'inside' the music. This is better done 'live' so that the musical examples can be heard in conjunction with the commentary. I expect to do this as part of the next St. James's music review in March – see you there!"

Part 3 In the first two articles I gave the background to this project and explained the harmonic basis of the setting. This time I will concentrate on how I set the *Gloria* ('Glory to God in the highest') and *Sanctus* ('Holy, Holy, Holy') and try to take you 'inside' the musical process.

Both pieces make use of the same two basic melodic building blocks:



The *Gloria* is the longest continuous sung text in the liturgy and, as shown in the service book, falls into three sections. I have kept to tradition by making the outer sections musically similar – a triumphant affirmation of God's glory. It is in 3 time, following early church music practice of symbolising the Trinity by this means. The melody of the first two lines paints a musical picture, leaping up to depict 'highest' and falling by step back to 'earth':

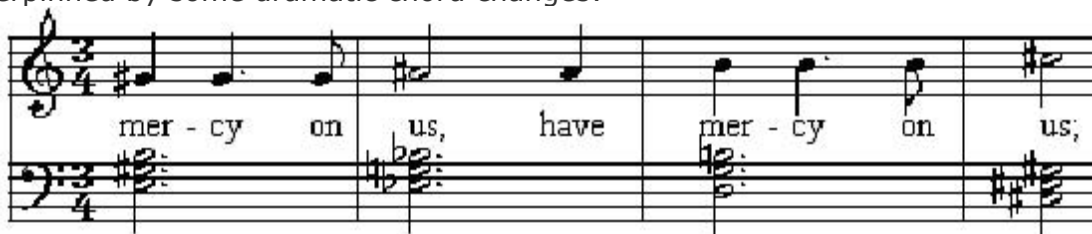


The next two pairs of lines start with the same rising melody but have different endings, the last one ending high instead of low.

The first half of the middle section is characterised by unease about our lack of worthiness to receive God's mercy. This is achieved musically by the harmonies, particularly on the words 'sin of the world' where notes from two different versions of the scale clash with each other:



However, we grow in confidence in asking Jesus for that mercy and this is reflected in the rising melody underpinned by some dramatic chord changes:



This section ends with a return to the mood of the beginning, the melody emphasising an image of Christ in glory with more upward leaps, and our conviction with repeated notes:



The final section maintains this triumphant mood and ends on a high 'Amen'. The Sanctus is built on a similar melody and chord sequence because there is the similar liturgical intent of praising God's glory. However, to underline God's 'power and might', the music is in a more march-like 2 in a bar.

My final article will look at some of the more reflective moments elsewhere in the liturgy and explain how and why I arrived at the, admittedly, somewhat strange harmonies that can be heard there.

Part 4 In my final article I am concentrating on some of the more reflective and intense moments in the sung liturgy, starting with what is for me the core statement of our faith. The President says: 'Great is the mystery of faith' and we reply:



The arrows indicate the direction of the melody: curling downward for 'has died', counteracted by an upward inflection for 'is risen' and rising to end on a high point to affirm our belief that Christ will indeed come again.

In my second article I discussed how harmonic tension can be used to give music emotional impact. The 'mystery of faith' is introduced by a closely-spaced, mysterious and rather frightening chord built up note-by-note on the organ, which is also used to harmonise 'died'.



'Risen' is given a much brighter sounding major chord but then two further notes are added that do not belong to it – they are higher than the sounds our ears are expecting.

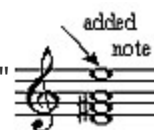


'Come again' is harmonised first by a different, equally bright-sounding chord and then some unexpected notes are again added. The symbolism and musical effect are different here. The two components of this final harmony are different chords but they have a fundamental note in common. The first chord represents us, here and now, the second represents that 'which passes all understanding' and the common note represents Christ, linking the two. The whole of this part of the liturgy is bound together with a continuous organ pedal note that symbolises the connectedness of our faith.



The Responses, that come earlier in the liturgy, are composed along similar lines. There is a similar melody and the same organ pedal note. Although the harmonies are not the same, they also make use of 'added notes' to lift us, aurally, out of the familiar into the presence of God. The Agnus Dei, 'Lamb of God', comes at an especially spiritually-charged point in the liturgy just before Communion. We seek God's mercy and peace through Jesus, portrayed as God's lamb. The music is gentle and pleading, slow and with winding step-wise melodies - no powerful upward leaps here.

There is little tension to disturb the calm although the unusual succession of chords is intended to keep us lifted above the humdrum and the mundane. The final chord, on the word 'peace', again contains an 'added note' but one that releases the tension, rather than increasing it.



I could go on but I hope I have written enough to show how I have tried to create a musical setting of the liturgy worthy of our worship at St James's. Like all unfamiliar things, it may appear strange to many but maybe these articles will go some way towards explaining the why and the how. I also hope that, as familiarity grows over the coming months, this will breed a different response to that suggested by the old saying.